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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000081

DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/AF, DS/TIA/ITA, DS/IP/SPC/SO, AF/E,
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2029

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [ASEC](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: ISAIAS ANGERED OVER MILITARY DESERTIONS

REF: ASMARA 74

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for Reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) In late February, an Eritrean infantry platoon (unit/exact location unknown) located in the vicinity of Om Hager deserted its post, with some soldiers fleeing to Sudan and the others to Ethiopia, according to a UN source. Upon hearing of this news, President Isaias became irate and wanted to sack all of the officers in the southwest military district, but realized he could not expend the political capital to do so. Reportedly, though he is frustrated by the increase in desertions, Isaias realizes his ability to remain in power is tied to the loyalty of his military commanders.

12. (C) The UN source said the desertions took place before the bombing in Haicota on February 25 (Reftel). He also stated his military contact said the GSE deliberately planted the bomb to deter further military desertions and to dupe the local populace into thinking foreign insurgents were responsible and rally around the government. NOTE: The GSE rarely announces internal attacks, but when they do, they always blame the Ethiopian government. That they have not done so in this instance is curious. END NOTE.

13. (C) Comment: So far Isaias has been able to buy the support of top generals by allowing them to engage in contraband trade with Sudan and Yemen. This recent defection, coupled with a covert interview with a dissent military officer getting wide play on asena.com (septel), suggest the military commanders may be losing control of their troops. Post has been unable to corroborate the assertion that the GSE was the mastermind behind the bombing in Haicota.

MCMULLEN